

This page: *The Cape to Kathmandu expedition team and their two Discos on the Karakoram Highway.*

TWO WOMEN and A BAND OF BROTHERS

With the expedition Landies and crew safely back in South Africa, *Leisure Wheels* caught up with the Greybeard of Adventure, Kingsley Holgate and his core expedition team that recently completed a tough but exciting transcontinental Land Rover journey from Cape Town to Kathmandu.



THERE'S Kingsley's highly experienced son Ross, a veteran of countless expeditions who has adventure flowing in his veins and faces the daily challenges of being expedition leader; his wife Anna, who ably assists with the humanitarian work and juggles home base and children with expedition life and red-bearded Bruce Leslie, who coaxes his heavily-laden 130 Defender through thick and thin, helps manage logistics and has not only become an accomplished photographer, but also bangs out a great camp stew commonly known as 'Imodium and Goat'. Sheelagh Antrobus is Kingsley's partner and somehow, while on the move, transcribes his scribbles and 'bush notes' into despatches and stories and also plays a key role in the expedition community conservation work; and then there's 'Shova Mike' Nixon, a crazy adventurer in his own right who's climbed Mt Everest twice as part of the 7 Summits of the World and as a member of the Land Rover mountain-bike team, is one of only three people to have completed every Cape Epic mountain-bike race.

Q: Kingsley, what made you choose Kathmandu as a destination?

A: It was one of those crazy adventure concepts that started in the Explorer's Bar at Africa House in Zululand. We were discussing what our next expedition should be, when Shova Mike, came up with the idea of 'Africa & Beyond': an odyssey that would take us beyond Africa's shores. Out came the tattered *National Geographic Atlas* and by midnight, we'd hatched a grand plan to link Cape Town's 600 million-year-old Table Mountain to the ancient Himalayas.

And so the Cape Town to Kathmandu expedition was born and three months later, on Madiba Day (18 July 2018) as part of the centenary celebrations of Nelson Mandela's birth, we departed from Nobel Square at the V&A Waterfront with that gnawing, rat-in-the-stomach feeling of anticipation. Africa we know, but the journey from Istanbul in Turkey, through the Caucasus and central Asia to the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal was a whole new ballgame for us, and also

the first time the new Land Rover Discoverys would be undertaking such a challenging transcontinental journey. What a great adventure it turned out to be.

Q: Ross, as expedition leader, can you share three of the biggest challenges you had to face on this transcontinental journey?

A: If you think Africa is tough, try crossing Asia to Kathmandu. One of the many logistical challenges on an expedition like this was visa applications. We all filled in mountains of detailed forms: mother's name, father's name, places of birth, children's details, schooling and work history, religion, travel history for the past 10 years - even pathology lab blood tests to prove we weren't harbouring HIV, TB or other infectious diseases. Thick files of vehicle papers, proof of hotel bookings, official letters of invitation, certified proof of permanent residence, travel insurance, stamped three-month bank statements, affidavits, an apostille from the South African High Court to prove vehicle ownership, certified copies of

passports and driver's licences... on and on. We even made up our own 'official' Cape Town to Kathmandu stamp. It worked like a charm.

The second huge obstacle was the shipping of the three Land Rovers from Africa to Turkey. What a nightmare, wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. Weeks of shipping delays, transshipping, loading, off-loading, customs clearances... and we think Africa is difficult. Thank goodness for the Land Rover Adventure Club of Turkey who came to our rescue. But this was all quickly forgotten once we were behind the wheels of our trusty Landies and back on the expedition objective of reaching Kathmandu in Nepal.

Pakistan threw a different set of challenges, especially travelling through the Baluchistan Province along the Afghanistan border. It was a constant exercise in security permissions and paperwork, one of which is ubiquitously referred to as NOC (no objection certificate), a compulsory document for foreigners travelling from one region to another. Then it was police and military convoys



from place to place, where you can go, where you can't, where you can sleep, where you can't, what you can see and what you can't. But it was all made worthwhile by the incredible friendliness of the people of Pakistan and being South African was hugely helpful; talk cricket, mention Hashim Amla and old favourite Jonty Rhodes and you've got an instant circle of new friends. Loved the curry and in the freezing cold mornings, seeing smoke from a roadside breakfast fire, which meant a stop for sweet tea and fresh, crispy paradhas dipped into the yolks of hot fried eggs.

Thirdly, I can hardly begin to explain the challenge of driving a large, new Land Rover Discovery through the mayhem and congestion of a country that has 1.35 billion people. Can you believe India has a daily population growth equivalent to that of Botswana's entire population? Side mirrors are generally removed so more cars can straddle the streets and a hand is constantly on the hooter

Opposite page: The team in Georgia. **Above:** Kingsley taking tea in Pakistan. **Below:** Ross Holgate in one of the two Discos used on this trip.



to warn other motorists of the imminent, pending sideswipe you will be getting. And just when you think you've got a metre or two of open road, a kamikaze tuk-tuk driver swoops in to suck up that last remaining space. There's a wonderful Swahili word that sums it all up - *Shagalabagala*. Chaos!

Q: Ross, this was a world-first journey for the new Land Rover Discoverys. Did you make any changes to the vehicles?

A: Our vehicles of choice for this world-first crazy adventure that took us out of the sanctity of Africa were two brand new Land Rover Discoverys, already tried and tested on the recent expedition to explore Africa's most easterly point on the dangerous Horn of Africa in Somalia. Our third Land Rover was the old, faithful 'mother ship' in the form of a Defender 130, which carries all the expedition's humanitarian items.

The Discoverys were fitted with 18-inch Cooper S/T



Maxx tyres (30 000km without a single puncture), a rear-mounted winch system, a floating dual battery system, a full length Front Runner roof rack mounted with fuel jerry cans, spare wheels, mud ladders and a front-mounted LED light bar. The Landies were definitely the heroes of this transcontinental journey across Africa, Europe and Asia and they never missed a beat.

Q: Anna, can you give us three of your personal highlights on this journey?

A: Turkey was an absolute highlight: my first time off African soil, straight into the ancient, romantic city of Constantinople (today Istanbul) where East meets West and what an incredible lesson in tolerance, where churches and mosques, Christians and Muslims live in relative

peace and harmony. It wasn't just about the wonders of Turkey's great city but also the incredible friendliness of the rural farmlands of Turkey's outback. I marvelled at a country that wants for nothing and is completely self-sufficient. Buying organic fruit, vegetables and honeycombs in racks from roadside farm stalls, with no knowledge of the Turkish language, negotiating with just a

humble South African smile. Georgia, another highlight! Following the Black Sea coast, we ventured into the alpine regions of Europe's highest permanent settlements. Freezing temperatures, icy snow passes, camping wild along the Russian border. Then, after securing some organic, homemade wine from a friendly farmer, I became the expedition's official Georgian

translator: it's much like Afrikaans, you know.

India is not for the faint-hearted but I'll always remember Varanasi on the River Ganges. I thought the stories of burning bodies was something of the past, but as we walked along the sacred river bank, passing cobra snake charmers, Hindu priests and decorated monks, dead human bodies in what seemed like a continual flow were being cleansed in Ganges before being placed on wood piles and set alight. Constant shavings of sandalwood tossed onto the flames of the funeral pyres eased the smell of burning flesh. There was an aura of fleeing souls searching for their new place of life.

And then, of course, arriving in magical Kathmandu: the very reason for our journey.

Q: Shova Mike, after more than a decade with the Kingsley Holgate team, this latest odyssey was also a first for you. Can you share some of the emotions and mountain-biking challenges you had to face?

A: The list of 'world-first' expeditions is getting ever shorter and there's a need to adventure deeper into the continent and beyond to find

them. So when the chance of mountain biking through 11 countries on this expedition came along, I was all aboard for some interesting challenges.

The sheer diversity of the ride and the rugged beauty of our own Wild Coast was a great start, as was following ancient Silk Routes in Turkey and through the medieval ports along the Black Sea coast. The mountain passes of northern Georgia near the Russian border were another highlight; at over 3 000 metres and in thick snow and mud, it was a real lung buster. Dropping down into Armenia, the onset of the northern winter really caught me off guard, with temperatures of -8°C and freezing winds. I had to wear every stitch of clothing I had on the bike. With relief, the expedition route turned south through the incredible ancient history of Iran and across the vast central Dasht-e Lut (Great Sand Desert). Looking back at the map now, I realise each pedal stroke was following in the footsteps of Alexander the Great.

I suppose the greatest adventure was in Pakistan, where with a military escort and following the expedition Landies, I seized the



Opposite page: Mike Nixon leads the convey of Land Rovers up the Karakoram Highway at 3 000m above sea level, on his Santa Cruz mountain bike. **Above:** Photographer Bruce Leslie in his element on the historic Silk Road. **Below, clockwise from top right:** Wearing everything to stay warm in Armenia ● Bruce behind the cooking pots. ● The team with elephants at Chitwan. ● Anna helping children complete their elephant art. ● Kingsley and Sheelagh handing over a Lifestraw water treatment device.



opportunity to ride the historic Khyber Pass to the Afghan border, only to be arrested and bundled into a military truck halfway up “for my own protection”. But for sheer physical effort, nothing could compare with cycling sections of the Karakoram Highway almost to the Chinese border.

At over 3 000 metres, this historic Silk Road was really hard work: there are no ‘free’ kilometres and I had to fight for every pedal stroke. The immense reward, however, was to cycle in the shadow of Nanga Parbat, the famed ‘Killer Mountain’ and other 8 000-metre peaks where the Karakorum Range meets the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush.

Q: Bruce, Kingsley tells us that some 15 years ago, you came on one expedition – and never left?

A: Yes, indeed, that’s how it all started. I volunteered to do the Land Rover backup on a river boat expedition to track the Rufiji River in Tanzania from source to mouth in the footsteps of Frederick Courteney Selous. The adventure bug bit me and I never looked back.

I’m hugely privileged to be one of the team and to have been part of some epic journeys, like tracking the outline of Africa through 33 countries in 449 days and reaching all seven of Africa’s extreme geographic points, including a very tough



expedition to the centre of the continent deep in the rainforests of the Congo basin and the dangerous Extreme East expedition to Ras Xaafun in Somalia.

Driving the big 130 Defender is part of my life, as is grabbing the moments through my lens: the faces, the colours, the cultures, the panoramas. But it’s not all sunsets and humour around campfires, we’ve had our fair share of danger. I was knifed by a pirate while we were sailing a traditional, wooden Swahili dhow up the east coast of Africa to Somalia, and nearly died. On this latest journey, we had moments of anxiety while travelling close to the border with Afghanistan but I wouldn’t change this living-on-the-edge life for anything.

Q: Sheelagh, as the only other woman on the expedition team, how did you cope in countries like Iran and Pakistan?

A: Especially in the Islamic Republic of Iran, women have to be well covered up in public: headscarf, no hair showing, compulsory thigh-length jacket, no bare arms, shoulders or legs, so yes, I did find that quite a challenge. And in the Baluchistan region of Pakistan, just too many guns for my liking. It was difficult to even go to the loo behind a bush in the desert without an AK-47-toting ‘minder’ following me. But what more than countered the frustrations was the extraordinary friendliness of the Iranian and Pakistan people and others. So many went out of their way to welcome us and make our journey through their countries a fantastic experience.

I lost count of the number of ‘selfies’ I was asked for, even with a flabbergasted Iranian policeman who stopped us for speeding and couldn’t believe his eyes when he discovered a woman driving a right-hand-drive vehicle! I also loved the vast history of these ancient countries, the 30-odd World Heritage Sites we visited all along the route from Cape

Top: Waiting for paperwork in Pakistan. **Centre:** The boys and their Patan hats on Khyber Pass in Pakistan. **Left:** Posing alongside the Karakoram Highway. **Opposite page:** A dusty Ross Holgate with the faithful Discovery in the Dasht-e-Lut (Great Sand Desert), Iran.



Town, and the enormous privilege of journeying through the lands of the world’s major religions: from early Christianity to modern-day Islam, the colourful Hindu culture of India and the gentle, peaceful Buddhists who welcomed us so warmly in Kathmandu.

My head is chock-full of memorable moments, especially of the humanitarian and community conservation work we were able to do, staying true to our motto of also using these Land Rover journeys to improve and save lives.

Q: Kingsley, what stands out for you about this journey and how does it feel to be back home in South Africa?

A: We made it to Kathmandu and then beyond to Calcutta in India only because of a strong team effort and all of us believing that we could do it. Ross did an incredible job with all the difficult paperwork: South African-registered

vehicles have seldom, if ever, done this route. And when things were unbelievably tough, the military convoys, the anxiety of whether we’d make it across some of the borders, the high-altitude, often treacherous mountain passes, camping in well below-zero temperatures and the crazy, unimaginable congestion of especially India’s roads; we relied as always on a sense of optimism, humour and the belief that the ‘Zen of Travel’ was riding on our shoulders.

This journey taught me once again that despite what is often portrayed in the media, people the world over are essentially peace-loving and friendly and the spirit of Ubuntu – as seen in the hundreds of messages of peace and goodwill in the expedition’s Madiba100 Scroll – can be found everywhere.

But it’s great to be back home in SA and be reminded of what a truly wonderful country we’ve got. Despite all the challenges we face, it’s always exciting and never dull. There’s no place like Mama Afrika! 🇿🇦

